Reply to Brandon Haught’s review of *No Dinosaurs in Heaven*

Greta Schiller

When you run “reviews” of documentary films—such as Brandon Haught’s review of *No Dinosaurs in Heaven* (*RNCSE* 2012;32[4]:7.1–7.3; available from http://reports.ncse.com/index.php/rncse/article/view/139/179)—I think that it is important that the “critic” actually knows something about documentary genres. My film is a particular form of documentary known as the personal essay film. According to the American University Center for Social Media, “[t]hey are particularly good at dramatizing the human implications and consequences of large social forces”:

Personal essay films have been widely diffused to teachers and community organizations, because they so powerfully evoke responses from and make connections for audiences. They are also favorites of film scholars, who use them to demonstrate with all the drama of the personal voice, the formal structures in filmmaking. (http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/making-your-media-matter/documents/case-studies/teachers-guide-use-personal-essay-films)

The job of a film critic is to critique the film, not propose why the film he would like to see would be a better film. Perhaps Haught would have liked to see a film that looks like a NOVA special or a magazine show. Those are valid documentary styles and it would indeed be a great thing if the mass media took more notice of the importance of science by making more of such TV programs. But that’s not the kind of film that I wanted to make.

The most erroneous comment and indeed the moment when the “critic” shows his absolute ignorance of film genre is when he states, “the big flaw in this storyline, though, was Schiller’s deep involvement.” This line is a priceless example of Haught’s lack of media literacy. The brilliant weaving together of two storylines held together by my musings was a directorial choice, not an editing flaw. This is an esteemed form of storytelling, one that is brutally honest and very opinionated. When a filmmaker of my caliber makes use of a campy animated dinosaur motif, it is not amateur—it is an aesthetic decision one may like or dislike but it is one that resonates with many audience members, especially those not well versed in the minutiae of defending the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

One thing Haught and I agree on is that, in his words, “the film certainly explores important concepts concerning science, education, religion, and science literacy.” Golly gee, thanks! If we are to win the culture wars, those of us on the side of reason, and of culture, will continue to make creative use of a variety of artistic strategies to get people thinking about science, religion, education, and maybe even media literacy. If *RNCSE* plans to enter the world of “film criticism,” please have critics do their homework. Documentary genre is the first thing I teach in my documentary production classes. The next thing I teach is
if you want to engage in creative filmmaking, be prepared for criticism, especially from autodidactic critics.

Meanwhile, I can hear my dinosaurs growling; they need to be fed and they love to eat paper pulp.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greta Schiller is an independent director and producer of documentaries for television, festivals, and theatrical and educational distribution. Her No Dinosaurs in Heaven premiered in 2010.

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